

## Deadly Wayne Crash Shows How Combination Of Old Roads, Gas Stations 'Could Ignite A Bomb'

**By: Christopher Maag, March 5, 2019**

The car was moving so quickly that when it hit the curb, it went airborne. The driver plowed through one gas station, narrowly missing a row of three gasoline pumps before crashing into a second station. A few inches farther and the car would have struck a pump, possibly causing an explosion and killing half a dozen people.

The details resemble the now-infamous crash last week at a gas station in Wayne, where a speeding SUV killed a father and son in their waiting car and the attendant pumping their gas.

This is a different crash, however. It happened weeks before and 20 miles away, on Route 4 in Englewood. It was violent. It was terrifying.

For Emre Akuz, it was just another day on the job.

“We have accidents here every other day,” said Akuz, 39, an employee at the BP station in Englewood where the car landed. “We had a crash earlier today. Last week another guy came in and hit our diesel pump. This highway is dangerous.”

It’s a danger baked into the landscape of New Jersey. Gas stations, many built before World War II, crowd the shoulders of state highways. Those highways are relics of another time, built before urban planners learned how much room cars and trucks need to accelerate, turn, and stop.

Then came the postwar building boom, when suburbs from Boston to Washington, D.C. filled with millions of homes and cars. Nowhere is the problem more acute than in New Jersey, said Michael Greenberg, director of the Center for Transportation Safety, Security and Risk at Rutgers University.

“In New Jersey we have 1,100 people per square mile. No one else is over 1,000,” Greenberg said. “There’s a lot of risk here.”

We know this. Every New Jersey resident has experienced the anxiety of sitting in a car just a few feet from highway traffic. We hear the roar of the tires, feel our cars sway in the wind.

“This happens everywhere,” said Billy Kahn, who co-owns 100 gas stations in New Jersey, including the station where last week’s fatal crash occurred and another Delta in Englewood, near last month’s crash. “This is not an issue of gas stations. It could be a McDonald’s.”

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#### **Sal Risalvato**

But the risk at gas stations is higher, said Greenberg and Sal Risalvato, executive director of New Jersey Gasoline and C-Store Association, the trade group for gas station owners. The reason is self-evident: McDonald’s servers usually don’t stand outside in the parking lot all day.

New Jersey gas station attendants do.

“It was routine to hear screeching tires, and you always cringed,” said Risalvato, who experienced the danger firsthand pumping gas at an Exxon station on Route 17 in Paramus in the 1970s and ’80s. “I always thought, ‘What happens if any of those cars come careening off the road? We’re toast.’”

As old gas stations close, the danger slowly declines. For now, though, gas station employees along New Jersey’s highways work in fear.

#### **Risk averse**

Tito Krishnamurthy didn’t see the SUV that took his friend’s life last week. He saw a blur, a flash of color, and something flying through the air.

After the crash, Krishnamurthy heard something he has never experienced in 10 years working at the Delta station on Route 23 in Wayne: silence.

The crash killed two customers, Jon Warbeck and his son Luke. It also killed Lovedeep Fatra, Krishnamurthy’s friend and co-worker. It was the worst crash Krishnamurthy has seen here.

It was not the first.

In just the last two years, one car sped off the highway and toppled a utility pole next to the pumps. Another zoomed across Krishnamurthy's lot and into the Mazda dealership.

Now Krishnamurthy avoids the pumps, keeping instead to the repair shop he runs on the site.

"We're staying inside the building as much as possible," he said.

The pump where the accident happened sits 24 feet, 10 inches from traffic. Neither Krishnamurthy nor Kahn knows when the station was built, but it appears to predate Wayne Township's modern zoning code, which bans structures within 75 feet of highways.

"People today are much more risk averse," Greenberg said.

"I didn't hear anything from the other side of the pump," he said.

Using Google satellite imagery, NorthJersey.com identified a number of local gas stations that appeared extremely close to the road. Then we went to the stations and measured the distance from the curb to the closest pump. We found nine stations where the distance was anywhere from 22.8 feet to 34.9 feet. The stations were on Route 17 in Paramus, Ramsey and Hasbrouck Heights; on Route 4 in Paramus and Englewood; and on Route 46 in Clifton.

Old gas stations that violate modern zoning rules may continue operating, Greenberg said. Owners planning to renovate must follow the law, however. With no statewide rules, zoning laws vary by municipality, said Tammori Petty, a spokesperson for the state's department of community affairs.

Last year Kahn and his co-owners won approval from Wayne Township's council to replace the existing Delta station on Route 23.

"Now we're just looking for the financing," Kahn said.

If the project moves forward, it will join a national trend of gas station consolidation. New Jersey had 6,000 gas stations in 1978, Risalvato said. Today, 2,300 remain. Many that closed resembled the Delta in Wayne, with pumps sitting dangerously close to the road.

"There is no way a planning board would ever allow those locations to be built today," Risalvato said.

They didn't close due to safety concerns, however. Gasoline retailers' profit per gallon shrank in recent years, Risalvato said, forcing them to build bigger stations and sell in higher volumes.

Old stations also have old storage tanks. Insurance companies largely refuse to insure tanks older than 40 years, said Risalvato.

"These old tanks leak like sieves," Greenberg said.

Renovation is so expensive, old stations on small lots sometimes get abandoned, Greenberg said. Stations with sufficient traffic and land merit reinvestment, often getting rebuilt bigger and farther from the road, making them safer.

But as Kahn's rebuilt Delta station in Englewood shows, a new station isn't always safe. Especially if it sits near an old New Jersey highway.

## **A crash every day**

Singharpreet Singh removed the gas nozzle from the tank of a Nissan Altima. Pushing his pink cap higher on his forehead, he looked uphill as cars hustled down Route 4, away from the George Washington Bridge.

"There are accidents here every day," said Singh, 23. "Every day."

Singh pumps gas at the Delta gas station in Englewood, which was rebuilt in 2015, Kahn said. It's the last station in a row of four, which many motorists experience as a blur of neon.

All the stations have modern-looking canopies, with pumps moved away from the curb. At the BP, next door to the Delta, one pump is 30 feet, 7 inches away from traffic.

That's still too close, employees said.

"A week ago, a drunk guy drove in and hit the pump," said Sully Esen, a worker at the BP. "It's dangerous. We're so close to all the traffic."

"The lanes are narrow here, and the people go so fast," Emre Akuz said. "They wind up here in the parking lot of the station maybe once every six months."

People who often drive this section of highway understand the risk.

"I realize a car can easily careen into a gas station, creating a hazard," said Englewood Mayor Michael Wildes. "A car going into a gas station could ignite a bomb."

And yet Englewood's government has not investigated possible solutions, Wildes said. In the meantime, fatal crashes like the one in Wayne remain incredibly rare, Greenberg said.

The man who represents station owners doesn't understand why.

"In all the years I've been in the business, I've always been amazed that we don't hear of more fires, explosions and accidents" at New Jersey gas stations, Risalvato said. "Why doesn't disaster happen more often? I don't have an answer."